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ABSTRACT

Arguing that educational research rarely makes it into print, this paper discusses what is wrong with educational research, what is wrong with the press, and offers suggestions for improving the relationship between educational research and the press. The paper argues that (1) education research is badly underfunded; (2) the most pressing questions in education research are often ignored; (3) most of the research comes in bits and pieces; (4) much education research is written in dense, abstract prose; and (5) education research often confirms common sense, which does not make for much of a news story. The paper argues that since most education research fails to pass the test of being new and significant, reporters and editors usually ignore it. The paper also notes that education is considered a backwater beat. The paper concludes that the relationship between education research and the press could be improved if there were a few well-edited research journals with a broad audience, a dozen media stars who could serve as sources for the press, and a regular schedule of research reports from organizations such as the Department of Education and the National Assessment of Educational Progress. (RS)

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The Press and Education Research: Why One Ignores the Other

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Presented at the Colloquium on the Interdependence of Educational Research, Educational Policy, and the Press, August 11-12, 1989, Commonwealth Center for the Education of Teachers, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA.

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During the last week in March, 8,000 education researchers met in San Francisco for the annual convention of the American Educational Research Association. They included some of the best and brightest in the education business: psychologists, sociologists, statisticians, demographers and curriculum planners, as well as researchers with an array of other specialties. More than 1,000 papers were presented. The topics ranged from intelligence testing to the educational role of artificial intelligence.

But unless you were in San Francisco that week, you probably didn't hear much about the meeting. Among the nation's major newspapers--the New York Times, the Wall Street Journal, the Los Angeles Times, the Washington Post and the Chicago Tribune--not one carried a single story from the meeting. The wire services--AP, UPI and Reuters--ignored it too. As a result, so did the broadcast media--radio and TV. Ditto for the weekly news magazines.

Why did the press treat this gathering of education researchers as a non-event, not worthy of a single report? Certainly, their readers and listeners are interested in news about education and the state of America's schools. They want to know in what areas students are doing better, or worse. They would be interested in knowing what ideas seem to work or have proven to be failures? They certainly want to know how they can help a son or daughter learn better? If a reporter looked hard

enough, he or she could find some answers to some of their questions in a number of AERA sessions. None did, however.

But if you were to conclude that the news black-out from the AERA convention means the press is unwilling to report the findings of education research, you would be wrong. Just a month earlier, on February 13, four California education researchers who formed a group called Policy Analysis for California Education issued a report on the "Conditions of Children in California." It pulled together statistics and projections on the state's children and includes some startling numbers: About 1.7 million children live in poverty in California. By the year 2000, the state will have one in eight of America's school children, and California's public schools will enroll more than the combined total of the 24 smallest states.

Two of the researchers, Michael Kirst of Stanford University and James Guthrie of the University of California, Berkeley, held a press conference to comment on the findings. They had mailed the report itself, along with a six-page press release, to most of the state's education reporters and editorial writers the week before. Though the report's findings were not actually new or surprising--this was not an announcement of nuclear fusion in a jar--the report nonetheless was treated as important news by nearly every newspaper and broadcast outlet in the state. The San Francisco Chronicle, which reported nothing from the AERA meeting in its hometown, put the Kirst-Guthrie report on its front page. The headline read: "Shocking Report on California's

Poverty Kids." There were similar stories, as well as editorials, in the Sacramento Bee, the Oakland Tribune, the L.A. Times, the L.A. Herald, the Orange County Register, the San Jose Mercury and a host of smaller papers. The N.Y. Times ran an AP wire story on the report (with a San Francisco dateline), while Education Week ran its own staff-written story.

A few days before that, the National Assessment of Educational Progress got similarly broad national coverage for a 20-year analysis of its testing results. Its executive director Archie Lapointe **appeared** at a Washington press conference to discuss the findings. I stress **appeared** because the broadcast press needs a live figure talking before its cameras and microphones. No talking head, no story. NAEP also sent out in advance a press release and a copy of the text for those reporters who were interested in the substance of the report. Its main conclusion was that American students seem to be doing better in basic skills, but poorer on the so-called "higher order skills" of thinking and reasoning. This finding, while also not novel or shocking, was treated as important news in much of the press-newspapers, TV, radio and the news magazines.

The contrast in how press covered these two reports, compared with the silence that greeted the AERA, tells much about how the press operates. It also gives some strong clues as to why much of education research is ignored.

For 10 years, I worked as an education reporter. For five of them, I worked In Washington as a reporter for the weekly

Education USA, covering among other things the then-Department of Health, Education and Welfare and the National Institute of Education. During those years, I also wrote articles and columns for a number of education publications such as the Phi Delta Kappan and Educational Leadership. For the next five years, from 1981-1986, I was the Education writer for the Los Angeles Times, based in Los Angeles. Prior to all that, in 1974-75, I had spent about 18 months as an assistant to the director of National Institute of Education, writing articles and testimony to explain to Congress and other curious persons what it (NIE) was doing.

Over those 12 years, I had a chance to look from both sides of the hill. At NIE and on occasion as a reporter, I saw education research studies containing important findings which nevertheless were ignored by the national press. Later, as an L.A. Times reporter seeking information on what I viewed as important stories, I was frustrated at the lack of useful research findings.

It was obvious to me, as it would be to any person drawing breath, that there was a problem here. Education was one of the largest enterprises in the nation--and arguably, its most important undertaking--yet new ideas and research conclusions about schooling rarely make their way into print. Education researchers came to view reporters as hopeless hacks uninterested in substance. Education reporters certainly viewed most education researchers as useless academics, unable to provide a clear answer to the simplest of questions. I do not intend to

quarrel with either assessment. Since there is plenty of blame to share, I plan to give roughly equal treatment to both sides in this paper.

I have divided the paper into three sections. First, What's wrong with education research? I have stressed five points. 1. In general, there is not enough of it. Education research is badly underfunded. 2. The most pressing questions in education are often ignored. 3. Most of the research comes in small bits and pieces. Unless pulled together in a synthesis, it is of little use. 4. Much education research is useless for another reason: it defies reading. Such dense, abstract prose is often a cover for hazy thinking. 5. Education research often confirms common sense. This is fine, but does not make for much of a news story.

Second, what's wrong with the press and why it usually ignores education research. In judging the value of a story, reporters and editors ask three questions: is it new, is it significant and is the information reliable? There are few education research studies that actually pass the test of being new and significant. Moreover, education reporting is considered a backwater beat at most newspapers, one which bright and aggressive reporters flee at the first chance.

In the third section, I make four suggestions for improving the relationship between education research and the press. What is needed are more syntheses of research, a few well-edited research journals which can gain a larger audience, a dozen media

stars who can serve as sources for the press, and a regular schedule of research reports from organizations such as the Department of Education and the National Assessment of Educational Progress.

What's Wrong with Education Research

The Education business is remarkable for what we don't know about it. Whether you read the education journals or talk to friends over dinner about their child's schooling, you come away with the same impression: the process of education remains something of a mystery. When I hear a friend recount how their son's teacher recommended that he would benefit from being held back in his grade for another year or by avoiding hand-held calculators, I'm reminded of what doctors told my grandfather 35 years ago after suffering a heart attack. He was told to stay on a diet of mostly rice for several weeks because the Japanese ate a rice diet and rarely suffered from heart attacks or high blood pressure. It's true, we now know, that there is a correlation between diet and heart trouble. But that link between rice and low blood pressure was only the post primitive of medical observations. Of course, in the three decades since then, the fields of medicine and nutrition have made great advances in knowledge, thanks to thousands of controlled studies. The field of education, on the other hand, seems mired in notions of rice diets.

Whether you are a parent, a teacher, a school board member or a legislator (or perhaps all four), there are fundamental

questions about education to which we do not have solid answers. Here are a few:

-Will a child learn mathematics better if he/she is introduced to calculators and computers at a young age? Or conversely, will these tools serve as a crutch and actually hinder a student from learning math?

-Do students become better writers if they can learn on a computer screen?

-Do students fare better in small grade schools and high schools or larger ones?

-Does spending more money on education make a difference in how much is learned? And if so, where should the extra money be spent: smaller classes, higher salaried teachers, new textbooks and workbooks, better stocked libraries, more computers or more classroom aides?

-If a child comes to school not speaking English, will he or she do better in the long run by starting out being taught in his native language or by making a quick transition to English?

-Do black students fare better if they attend integrated schools? This question, like the previous one on bilingual education, has been with us since the last 1960s, but I have yet to see much research that yields an answer-or even a solid clue.

-Compared to students of 20 or 30 years ago, why do today's students score better on standardized tests in the

elementary grades, but worse on the standardized high school exams?

-What is the effect on children and a school system in general if parents are given a choice of schools for their child?

-What is the effect on a school, its teachers and their children if teachers are given the authority to make the major decisions affecting that school?

These questions reflect many of my own frustrated inquires as a reporter. In the Los Angeles school district, about 60 percent of the children who entered kindergarten came from households where English was not the dominant language. The prevailing theory was that these children would be better off beginning their schooling in their native language and then making a slow and gradual transition to English. Many others thought--and demonstrated in the city's Catholic schools--that Spanish speaking students did just fine when immersed in English from the beginning. But finding good research on the subject was both time consuming and mostly fruitless. If there was ever a "rice-diet" question for education, the efficacy of transitional bilingual education was it.

But these questions also illustrate some larger points about education research. First, there is not enough of it. This is overwhelmingly apparent, regardless of how you consider the issue. Spending for research in education makes up only a tiny fraction of this nation's enormous annual bill for schooling at

all levels. In the early days of the National Institute of Education, we were fond of pointing out to dubious Congressional committees that federal spending for research and data gathering in education was only a tiny fraction of what was spent for research in agriculture or medicine. (Incidentally, in retrospect, these were the good old days, since federal spending for education research has shrunk since then. And the National Institute of Education itself is only a memory.)

Of course, we avoided comparisons with the Pentagon because the contrast was downright embarrassing. Everyone seemed to acknowledge that, whether you wanted to grow leaner hogs or develop a shield against missile attacks, research and experimentation were vital. But when the discussion turned to how students can be helped to learn more-and perhaps for less money--extra spending for research and experimentation was viewed as frivolous and wasteful. After all, virtually every Congressman, governor, legislator, parent and teacher has firm convictions about what works and doesn't work in education. In the end, the biggest obstacle facing education research may be that everyone has gone to school.

The National Institute of Education never had the money, the freedom or the intestinal fortitude to adequately study the major questions facing American education. I'm not certain which of those three were the biggest problem, but I am certain that a lack of money was a problem. Even a defined question, such as whether bilingual education helps or hurts non-English speaking

students, requires a large and long tracking study that is both carefully controlled and takes into account many factors. Obviously, some non-English students may be helped by a bilingual approach, while others are harmed by it. Clearly, such a study would be costly. But it seems also clear that an answer, or answers, would be worth the price.

Of course whether to spend more public money for education is a perennial political question. Advocates of more spending say you can't have good schooling without spending money. Critics say more money alone doesn't guarantee better schools. Any discussion about spending for education research sounds like an echo of that argument. I would grant, as an initial matter, that spending money on research doesn't mean you will learn anything. I have seen plenty of examples to demonstrate that point. But the flip side of the coin is that ignorance can be very costly too. To pick on bilingual education again, it would surely be a costly mistake if millions of non-English speaking students are being forced to follow an education approach that may only delay their learning of English and may ultimately cause them to fail in school and drop out. Wouldn't it be valuable to know, with some assurance, that introducing students to calculators and computers at a particular age will advance their learning of mathematics, writing and science?

It seems silly to even have to argue the point. The world-wide economic competition, spurred by the Japanese, has certainly convinced the business community that information, research,

experimentation and innovation are necessary for success and survival. In defense, medicine and agriculture, the value of research and development is unquestioned. Only in education, which must provide the raw material for research and innovation in all those other fields, is the value of large-scale research doubted.

To some degree, this reflects a problem with our political structure. More than 90 percent of funding for education comes from state and local governments. Yet large-scale research on education must depend for support on the federal government. And over the years, that support has been lacking.

I mentioned earlier that NIE not only lacked money, but freedom and intestinal fortitude as well. Ideally, you might think that a federal research agency would spend most of its money on the most pressing issues in its field. But if you think that, you are unaware of how Washington operates. NIE, and its successor at the Education Department, has a very small piece on the federal education pie, and there are many fingers in that pie. Most of its money is tied up in long-term commitments to federally created research laboratories and university centers. There may be merit to this system of long-term funding in general and to individual labs and centers in particular. But I tend to think much of this money is wasted. In the summer of 1985, I participated in an evaluation of the funding proposals from the labs and centers and concluded that I would not spend one dollar of my own money supporting those projects.

Nevertheless, it was clear from 1972 until today, that the top officials of the education research enterprise did not have the freedom to fund or not fund those labs and centers. Congress wanted them funded, and no executive branch official could have decided otherwise.

Then, there is the matter of intestinal fortitude. The leaders of a weak and wobbly vessel are not inclined to rock the boat. NIE in the 1970s was certainly a weak and wobbly vessel, and as a result, many of the most controversial questions facing American education were avoided by the agency. I have already mentioned two: the question of whether integration and busing helped black students achieve more in school, and the merits of transitional bilingual education. There are many others. It was my observation, as a staff member and later a reporter, that education research officials simply avoided those questions that were bound to provoke at least some hostile political reaction. Certainly, the NIE officials could counter that the agency funded "desegregation studies" or studies of bilingual agency or compensatory education. But in nearly every instance, the questions were carefully directed so as to avoid controversy--often at the express wish of Congress.

For example, with compensatory education, the then-Title I program, NIE studied which models of compensatory education worked best. A useful inquiry. But the studies avoided the question of whether the entire $3 billion-a-year program made an lasting difference in learning for low-income children.

Typically, the studies showed that low-income children who received special tutoring through Title I did somewhat better in grades one to three, compared to similarly poor children not receiving the extra services. This is as you would expect. But by grades four to six, the benefits had evaporated. The usual explanation for this finding was that the extra tutoring had ended, so naturally the benefits disappeared. But that is how education or tutoring is supposed to work. You expect some residual benefit. Let's say you and I want to learn to play tennis, and are of similar athletic ability. For the first five weeks, we go to the courts, where you take a $50 tennis lesson for a pro. By contrast, I simply hit balls against the wall. After five weeks, we play against each other and you win. That is to be expected. But if we play again five weeks later and we are evenly matched, I would question the value of your $250 worth of tennis lessons. But the Title I program was not subjected to such inquiries. One researcher summed it nicely in testimony before a delighted House education subcommittee. The Title I program, he said, is "an unquestionable success."

To be worth the investment in funds, as well as to gain respect, education researchers need to ask the hardest questions, and in the past, they have not done so.

But a lack of funding and the avoidance of hard questions concern what is NOT done. There are also major problems with what IS done. Let me summarize these problems with the labels

(1) bits and pieces, (2) indecipherable prose, (3) conflicts of interest, (4) common sense.

First, the bits-and-pieces problem. In most areas of research, major conclusions emerge from dozens, perhaps thousands, of small studies. Doctors, nutritionists and the general public now know that fatty foods lead to heart trouble and strokes and that a high cholesterol level in the blood can be an indicator of trouble on the way. But these conclusions did not emerge from a single national study of the population, but instead emerged over time from an array of studies and surveys. And of course, these conclusions are only statistical correlations. Statistically speaking, smoking cigarettes increases one's changes of getting lung cancer. The Tobacco Institute is still free to quibble over whether smoking cigarettes CAUSES lung cancer.

Research on education and schooling seems particularly beset by an array of studies of small groups of children, testing a rather narrow proposition. These studies, when published, may yield intriguing findings, but their value is limited. This, of course, is not a criticism of the researchers or their studies. Presumably, they would have preferred to conduct a larger study, with more children and over a longer period of time. But to build from intriguing findings to major conclusions requires that larger, follow-up studies grow from smaller inquiries. And my impression is, that does not happen regularly in the education business. As result, if you look for research in a particular

area (or God forbid, you tap into the ERIC system) you are likely to find reports from dozens of small studies, the conclusion of which will likely cancel each other.

Next comes indecipherable prose. Reading or listening to a typical education research report is to feel like a junior high school student in French class. You are inclined to look around to see if the others understand what is being said. Dense, abstract prose simply obscures the meaning--if there is any--of what is written or said. Several years ago, when I taught a news writing class for university studies in Los Angeles, I used journal articles in education as fine examples of lousy writing. I urged the students to use concrete nouns and active verbs. The verbs moved the sentence. In the education articles, I could read a page of prose without striking an active verb. Only abstract nouns and passive verbs.

Perhaps this complaint seems like nit picking. It is not. Whether the reader is a Congressmen, a teacher, a parent or a reporter, dense and abstract writing offends. It is a form of communication that does not communicate, except to fellow specialists. If the subject were nuclear physics or cell chemistry (or something else I imagine to be inherently complex), the dense prose would be more acceptable. But education is not such a subject. Abstract prose which is so light so as to float from the page gives a hint that there may little or no substance here. Often, such writing reads like an attempt to mask muddled thinking.

Clear, concrete writing is more important in education research than in research in the so-called hard sciences. If you want to measure chemical reactions, gravitational pull or the force of a wind current, you are dealing with more or less precise facts. But much of educational research is impressionistic. Take, as examples, the effect of introducing a parental "choice" system into a school district, or effect of turning over more management authority to teachers. Both are intriguing concepts and the subject of much current interest. Both have their staunch proponents and fierce foes. But for the many who are undecided, a carefully observed experimental effort or two may be persuasive. Such a study or analysis could yield factual information. For example, what percentage of parents would take advantage of a choice option to move their child to another school? But in the larger sense, such a study would demand, if I may say so, a good reporter. A careful observer who comes with an open mind, the reporter must document and describe how the schools have changed due to giving parents more choices or teachers more power. In the end, the value of such a research undertaking will turn in large measure on the writing ability of the observer.

Third is conflicts of interest. I do not want to suggest this is a major or widespread problem of education research, but it is one I encountered with some frequency. In the Head Start program, the most widely cited research came from Ypsilanti, Michigan. The authors of the research also served as spokesmen

and advocates for more Head Start funding in general. This alone is not suspect. After all, it stands to reason that someone who observes the success of a program will be an advocate of it. But it does raise questions over whether this research should be given such credence as representing Head Start in general. A decade ago, the late Ron Edmonds was cited repeatedly as a source of so-called "effective schools" research, but it was difficult to find published research, at least in the U.S., to support the claims that some low-income schools were unusually successful. In the area of bilingual education, many of the frequently cited research authorities are also persons with a strong conviction--either pro or con--about the efficacy of bilingual education. For me, this was useful preparation for moving from education to law. In reading legal briefs, you get to see how the same evidence can be shaded and twisted to reach absolutely opposite conclusions. Too often, the same skills have found a home in the education research business.

Finally, there is the **problem** of common sense. Many of the best studies simply confirm common sense. Naturally, it is better to have common sense confirmed rather than refuted, but it does not make for a good news story. For example, studies have confirmed that students who take more math courses in junior and senior high school score better on the math portion of the Scholastic Aptitude Test. A useful confirmation of common sense, but not a finding that you would expect to find on the front page of a newspaper.

Education research, to be newsworthy, needs to tell us something that we don't already know. This is, of course, the same standard applied to other forms of research. Newspapers would not print the results of a long-term study which found that temperatures in the northern regions of the United States were colder than those in the southern climes. Nor would they print a report that carefully documented that most airplanes land safely. Education research many suffer particularly because there are no "dramatic breakthroughs." In the mid-1970s, when NIE was at its low point with Congress (or perhaps at one of its many low points), a Congressional affairs adviser was hired. He returned from his scouting mission on Capitol Hill to advise that the agency needed to report more research breakthroughs. A year later, he left the agency, frustrated that his salient advice had been ignored.

As an area for research, education will certainly enjoy less visibility and glamour than fields such as medicine, computers or aeronautics, because the possibility of finding something new and startling is remote. It is hard to imagine two education researchers calling a press conference to announce something akin to discovering cold fusion in a jar. And for that, we can be thankful.

Why the Press Ignores Education Research, or What's Wrong with the Press

Reporters and editors are interested in anything that sounds new and important. The findings of education research are

usually neither new nor important.

That at least is the general view from the press side. It may be a mistaken view, but it is worth considering how the press makes news judgement and why education research is ignored.

News reporters and editors are interested layman. The best of them are insatiable addicts for news, of all sorts. There is certainly no bias against news in education, as compared to medicine, science, the environment or similar areas. When I covered education in Los Angeles, I found my editors--from the desk editors to the managers of the entire paper--to be very interested in stories reporting results of education studies. In fact, they seemed to accept the view that so many school officials spout at public gatherings--that the fate of the nation depends to a large degree on the success of the education system. Therefore, the newspaper had a duty to pursue stories--large and small--that would shed light on the success or failure of the schools.

No one posted such a policy on the bulletin board. And no one gave me a set of such orders. Nevertheless, the viewpoint was clear--education was important, and we were going to cover it thoroughly. That, however, did not translate into dozens of stories per year on education research findings. Simply put, compared to fields such as medicine and the environment, the field of education yielded relatively few research reports and analyses that were worthy of news stories.

Both an education reporter and his/her editors make a judgment, often separately, about the value of a particular story. They regularly asks the same three questions.

Is this new? That simple question, with its hidden meanings, is always asked first. When an editor asks this question, he is really asking whether he knew it, or should have known it, before you told him. For example, the Los Angeles school board did a study of drop-outs although they would not use that pejorative term--and found that more than half of the students in some high schools left between 10th grade and 12th grade? Was that new? To our editors and, presumably our readers, the answer was "yes" so we gave that finding plenty of news space. To be honest, I was not certain that the finding was new in the sense that it differed from the past. In the past, the school district had simply not collected and published such data.

Is the finding significant? This is usually the second question. This too is obviously a judgement call, but one that is made all the time. A National Assessment of Educational Progress report concluding that high school students nationwide are doing worse in science today than their counterparts from 10 years ago would be judged as significant. Such a finding has obvious and broad implications for the nation's future and its ability to compete in an increasingly technological world economy. Among the various national testing programs, the NAEP provided the best barometer of school achievement, in my view,

and I regularly wrote stories based on NAEP reports. By contrast, we would likely ignore a story such as three students at a high school putting together prize-winning science projects. Naturally, their teachers, parents and principal thought this was a significant development, and were willing to explain why at length on the telephone. No, I would say, we do not operate by the standard that bad news is news and good news is not. Our editors gave just as much news space--and possibly more--to stories reporting that test scores had gone up, rather than down. These days, rising scores are news. Falling scores are not, although a steady drop is obviously significant. By the same token, we gave lots of coverage to the fact that Garfield High School in east Los Angeles had more students passing the A.P. calculus exam than any of the other 50 city high schools, thanks to teacher-turned-hero Jaime Escalante. This was good news. But more importantly, it was new and significant that students from a predominantly Hispanic and low-income school could outpace students on the affluent west side of town.

Finally, is it reliable? When something called the National Assessment of Educational Progress puts out a report saying that students today are reading better, a reporter and his/her editors tend to view that finding as reliable. When the Los Angeles school district puts out a report saying that its students are faring much better, the reporters and editors are at least mildly skeptical. Again, reliability is a judgment call, but a crucial one. Michael Kirst and Jim Guthrie can get more attention for

their reports because they are professors at Stanford and Berkeley, respectively. If they both taught remedial English at West Los Angeles Community College, their findings would be given less credence in the press, solely for that reason. When looking at a research report, editors and reporters want to know about the reputation of the authors, their affiliations and the basis for their findings. Just as an average radio listener may not give much credence to an announcement stating, "Ford (or Chrysler) is number one in quality," reporters and editors do not give credence to many conclusionary statements about education because of doubts about their reliability.

The answers to those three questions go a long way to determining what gets printed or broadcast and what is ignored. This is not to suggest that making news judgment is akin to a scientific, or even methodical process. It is not. Reporters and editors have many assumptions about what is new and what is not that are rarely challenged. And many stories get covered simply because the information is made easy and accessible for reporters. For broadcast news, holding a press conference often makes the difference between a story that is covered and one that is ignored.

What does all this mean for education research? It is that there are relatively few reports or findings that come to the attention of reporters which are new, significant and reliable. The burden in any such discussion of research and the press must remain with the researchers. (I admit here to sounding as if I

have spent too much time with lawyers, listening to their arguments over who bears the burden of proof.) At its best, research can change our fundamental views of what is true. Where then have we gone wrong in our understanding of education? What research out there is capable of confounding the conventional wisdom? That kind of research would be news, but I have encountered little of it.

For example, a thorough and reliable long-term study that found that spending more money for education had absolutely no effect on improving learning would be news. I say that because I think spending more probably yields some benefits.

A study which found that encouraging low-achieving high schoolers to drop out of school was better for their long-term success would be news. We continue to believe that keeping them in school at all cost yields a benefit to them later on.

A study that found that giving five-year olds hand-held calculators encouraged them to become proficient and inspired mathematicians by age 15 would be news.

A study that found that letting young children watch television rather than reading to them was correlated with later education success would be news--certainly to my wife and I. You could cite dozens of similarly silly examples to illustrate the point. News is something out of the ordinary and defies what you expect to be true. I am not aware of many education research studies that can surmount that hurdle to become real news.

Having said that, however, I continue to believe that education and education research are poorly communicated to the public because of the shortcomings of the press. These shortcomings can be described under four categories: (1) education as a backwater beat, (2) the herd instinct, (3) the focus on the local and (4) "we need an event."

It is not new (but maybe significant) that education and the schools are considered a backwater beat for reporters. On small newspapers, the school reporter is usually a young person who aspires to do something significant--like cover the police or city hall. Typically, the brightest and most aggressive reporters avoid the education beat. Those that find themselves there for a time quickly move on. On some of the nation's large newspapers, the education reporter can have a tenure longer than a losing football coach, but even there the job is not considered a particularly desirable or attractive one. Why is that so? I am not a good one to furnish an answer, since I never sought to cover something as fascinating as sports or politics. The easy answer, I suppose, is that education is viewed as boring. Important in some large sense, but boring nevertheless. Most reporters, beyond all else, do not want to cover something that their editors view as boring.

As a result, most of the newspaper reporters who cover education across the country are young, inexperienced and not fully committed to the job. Writing about education research is an acquired taste, one that is developed over several years of

work. You cannot walk in off the street, no matter how smart you may be, and write with judgment and insight about the findings of various reports and studies. You can rewrite press releases, and many school reporters do an adequate job of doing just that. But understanding what is significant and reliable requires much more, and a young, short-term reporter is not going to give the readers what they deserve. My quick ballpark estimate several years ago was that there were about a dozen adept and knowledgeable education reporters nationwide. The situation improved slightly in the early 1980s, as the "education reform" wave convinced editors that they needed to devote more space and manpower (woman power?) to covering education.

I speak here only of the newspaper segment. The broadcast press in general does not do nearly so well. In most local markets, the best you can hope for is a reporter who can faithfully summarize what he or she has been told at a news briefing. In Los Angeles, much of the news is communicated via radio to drivers stuck on the freeways. Typically, these radio reporters do little reporting. They read wire stories, summarize newspaper stories, and perhaps go to a press conference and do a 30-second spot story. The picture is not all bleak though. The news magazines--Time, U.S. News and Newsweek--have often had well qualified reporters and writers assigned to education, as has the Associated Press. In the broadcast area, John Merrow has done and continues to do first-rate work for the National Public Radio and the MacNeil/Lehrer News Hour.

I plan to say nothing about the specialized education press--those reporters and editors who write for publications such as the Chronicle of Higher Education and Education Week. As a one-time member of that club, I have an unduly high opinion of it. Those reporters and editors can be most influential, even though they do not reach a large audience. The audience they do reach is the education community. And the best general news reporters follow such publications and are informed by them.

Then, there is the herding instinct. You hear about this phenomenon on those occasions when the press, like a pack of piranha, go into what is called a "feeding frenzy." In recent years, the prey has included Gary Hart, Dan Quayle and Jim Wright. Dan Quayle is the exception to the rule; he survived the attacks, although he emerged somewhat chewed up. The herding phenomenon is important in education too--and not because Lauro Cavazos is about to succumb to a thousand tiny fish bites. Rather, the press, like a wandering herd, tends to feed together. Its members also tend to follow their leaders. The big national newspapers--the New York Times and the Wall Street Journal--tend to define what is news for the reporters and editors of most other papers. Every reporter has encountered some version of this phenomenon, as I can attest from hearing colleagues joke and grouse about it. The most fatuous, out-dated or even, on occasion, inaccurate story on the front page of the New York Times is bound to provoke a question or comment from an editor. Suppose the New York Times or the Journal writes an analytical

story suggesting, for example, that the wave of education reforms has made things worse, not better, in the schools. An education reporters can expect an editor will likely ask whether we shouldn't do the same story. Even pointing out the fact that we DID do the same story last month will usually not end the discussion.

There are all manner of pecking orders. For example, the big regional papers influence what is covered in their entire region. The Chicago Tribune in the upper Midwest, the Boston Globe in New England, and the Atlanta Constitution in the southeast are examples. This is certainly not an iron-clad rule. Many reporters and editors go their own way year after year, and all newspapers do some entirely original work. Quite often, you find an editorial page which takes a fresh, iconoclastic view of education, even while its news reporters stick to the conventional and the mundane. Nevertheless, the pecking order phenomenon is important to remember because the few often set the tone for the many. If the big papers consider something important, the others, including the broadcast media, are likely to develop the same interests.

Third, is the local angle. If you are a reporter covering science and medicine, you are likely to write stories that are national in scope. Science is not a New York, Los Angeles or Chicago story. But if you cover education, chances are much of your time, perhaps nearly all your time, will be spent covering local stories. Readers-and therefore, editors-are interested in

the first instance in how the kids in the city stories are faring. School boards are a big story, unfortunately, for most education reporters. At the L.A. Times, I tried to split my time by devoting one-third to Los Angeles area stories, one-third to California education stories, and one-third to national stories. Most education reporters do not have the luxury of spending even that much time doing broader stories. Most school reporters might say they would prefer to spend their days pulling together research studies and doing interviews in order to write a particular longer and more weighty story. But then, the school board is meeting today and they need to be there. Guess which assignments gets dropped first.

Finally, the need for events. The press no longer chases ambulances or fire trucks, unless you work for "Eyewitness News at 11." Nevertheless, most news coverage is still driven by events. Elections, deaths, strikes, meetings, demonstrations, court decisions and published reports. Education and education research are often the losers in the game, simply because there are few events that can focus attention and engender news coverage. Terrel Bell's "A Nation at Risk" report was one example, but once-in-decade exception.

In a sense, education writers have to paddle against the stream, trying to push stories into the news which are not in the daily flow of news events. More so than in most areas, education writers have to create their own stories. Find a focus. Pull together information. Shed light on some aspect of education.

The best education writers can carry on their own dialogue with the readers, not one driven by events but one drive by a sense of what is significant and true in the larger sense. For these writers and reporters, education research can be enormously influential.

What Can Be Done?

Time to pull the rabbit out of the hat. Enough of the problems of education research and the press. What can be done to bring about more, high-quality education research, coupled with an avid and adept press corps ready to publicize it? I wish I had a simply, all-encompassing answer to that question, but I don't. Without sounding downright silly, I cannot put forth a few sweeping recommendations which, if followed, would radically alter the situation. The federal government should do more to support and lead research and data-gathering in education, but many better people than me have made the same recommendation, without success.

Instead, I want to make four points, none of them sweeping, which could change things for the better. Needed: (1) syntheses of research, (2) a few distinguished journals, (3) a dozen media stars, and (4) regular reports from reputable research centers.

First, the field of education research is in need of more reports or studies which pull together the scores of smaller studies on the same topic. As mentioned earlier, the major conclusions of medicine science grew out of many isolated studies on small groups of patients. One study and its findings can spur

another. But to sway the audience beyond the research community requires researchers who can put together the smaller works and draw a larger conclusion. I am aware of the "meta-analysis" of the research on class size. These syntheses can be influential. They allow a general conclusion to be drawn from a mass of tiny studies, many of which raise conflicting signals. The press and the general public do not want or expect a single, simple answer from social science research. They do want a clue or a hint of what is generally true. The much-discussed medical research findings are usually little more than that. Eating two eggs a day for breakfast tends to increase your chances of having a later heart attack. Smoking a pack of cigarettes a day increases the chance you will later develop lung cancer. By the same token, reducing the size of a school class by two or three children increases the likelihood of better achievement. If true, that is a useful finding, one that should be of broad interest to the public.

In the education research business, there is always the question of who will pay for this. In many cases, it must be the federal government. Since the government over the years has funded hundreds of research studies, it seems only reasonable that some money could be found for syntheses of research.

Second, a few reputable journals. There must be a rule in this country that if three or more persons develop the same specialized interest, they start a journal or a news letter-perhaps even before exchanging FAX numbers. Obviously, journals

play a crucial role in filtering and communicating research results to fellow researchers. Some journals develop such prominence that they catch the eye of interested laymen, including news reporters. The New England Journal of Medicine and the Journal of the American Medical Association have achieved such a level of prominence that virtually every issue yields a national news story. For medical writers, those two journals and a few others are not only must reading, but are treated in themselves as news. The medical reporter who wants to write about the latest research need not look too far and spend hours gathering material. He can subscribe to those journals. In addition, the journals themselves publicize their up-coming reports through press releases.

This is, of course, illustrates the herd instinct at work. Since some of the nation's big newspapers and magazines began regularly reporting findings of studies appearing in the medical journals, none of the other reporters want to be left out. Network television and radio now follow along. But a better question might be, how did those journals develop their public reputations? The answer, I suppose, is that they had top-notch editors and a distinguished editorial board, and over many years, published research that was on the cutting edge. Only when their reputations were solid in the medical community would the lay public begin to take notice. News reporters are scavengers. They will not make the reputation of a journal, a researcher or a university center by publicizing their efforts. Rather, once a

journal, researcher or center develops an exemplary reputation in the field, news reporters or center develops an exemplary reputation in the field, news reporters will swoop in and discover a news source.

To my knowledge, the field of education has no research-oriented journals with such a national reputation. None that I know of are read avidly by interested layman. (I'm not certain there are many which are avidly read by specialists.) The Phi Delta Kappan and the newspaper Education Week are fine publications. They may be the best vehicles for publicizing education research to a broad audience for educators. They fall well short, however, of the standard set by the medical journals. I can not remember an instance where I saw a research report publicized in PDK or Education Week which struck me as an important news story, other than perhaps the annual Gallup Poll results commissioned by PDK. Here, I do not mean to fault these two publications. Education Week in particular does not seek to be a research journal. Still, if education researcher were a more vibrant field, both would carry more in the way of research findings, and other journals would be competing for attention too.

Third, the dozen media stars. The press relies on "experts" for information, perspective and the all-important quotes. If you were to listen in on newsroom conversations in our office or others like, you would hear snippets such as, "Who's a good person on the FCC and cable TV?". Or "Who could I call with a

question on the new AIDs drugs?" And so on, ad infinitum. Of course, the process whereby new knowledge and research gets transmitted to the general public is something of a mystery, but as far as the press is concerned, I would bet it is more likely to be carried over the telephone lines than over paper. Journals, reports and press releases are all important. They all play a role in carrying news to the news outlets. But none is as vital, in my view, as the telephone talks with experts.

These individuals tend to be academics of one sort or the other, although some may be former government officials or denizens of think tanks. Reporters seek out such people. If you come to trust their judgment and insights, you tend to call them with some regularity. They can be enormously influential in passing on new ideas and shaping opinions. Let me cite a few examples form my past: Chester Finn, the former assistant secretary for research. Ernie Boyer, the former U.S. commissioner of education. Diane Ravitch at Columbia. Bill Honig, the California school superintendent. Denis Doyle, formerly of the American Enterprise Institute. Also his one-time colleague Terry Hartie, now working as a Senate staffer. Al Shanker, the AFT president. And Mike Kirst and Jim Guthrie, whom I have already mentioned.

In fact, to simplify my point, let's say that the education research field needs a dozen more Mike Kirsts. One or two who specialize in testing. One or two who follow math and science. A few who are experts on teaching and teacher training. A few

specialists in reading. And so on. I say that realizing that there are fine people who match each of those descriptions. I have spoken to many of them, but didn't get to know them as well as Kirst. Those individuals, those experts, can be the real conduit for education research to reach the broader public. Their importance is enormous and often overlooked.

Finally, regular reports from reputable research centers. Time to return to the herd instinct. Not only does the press tend to follow its leaders, but it likes to be fed at a regular time. If an organization puts out a one-time report in Washington or New York, it is likely to get little coverage. However, if the same group puts out reports with regularity and if they are otherwise news worthy--the coverage will increase enormously. The first time around, reporters and editors read a story from a competitor and say to themselves, "Next time, we need to cover this." As an example, look how the news coverage of the Ted Bell's so-called "wall chart" of state-by-state statistics grew over several years.

The Education Department needs to follow this same approach, with some regularity, to announce important research findings. The National Assessment of Educational Progress has been getting better coverage recently because the organization and its reports are getting to be better known. In California, Kirst and Guthrie got little attention for their first PACE reports on the state's educational progress, but the coverage has grown steadily. If a research organization makes a practice of issuing regular reports

and publicizes them in advance through press releases, they will be covered in the press.

These four suggestions will not, in themselves, spur broad media coverage of educational research. They will, however, help ensure that important research is not ignored.